

Sensory Garden will have ?tremendous benefit? for people with dementia



By Brock Weir

People living in dementia now have an opportunity to get up close ? and get their hands dirty ? with nature with the opening of the Alzheimer Society of York Region's long-awaited Sensory Garden.

MPs, MPPs, and Council members from Aurora, King and Vaughan presided over the opening of the new garden on Thursday which takes pride of place at the Society's headquarters in south Aurora.

Three years in the making ? and the second phase of the Society's relocation to a more central location to meet the needs of all York Region clients, it will provide individuals with a much-needed green space with trees, foliage, flowers, and raised garden beds for the planting and harvesting of fresh vegetables and herbs.

?We have always known sensory gardens are an effective therapeutic activity that can stimulate sensations in the care of persons with dementia,? says Loren Freid, CEO of the Alzheimer Society of York Region. ?Every garden is unique and different but they all share certain features that help to trigger the stimulation of sensations and bring back fond memories of days gone by. They also provide an environment for security and comfort, and [provides] a really great outdoor activity that complements the work we do in our day programs.?

The Society estimates that dementia affects 564,000 Canadians, and 15,000 right here in York Region, 65 per cent of whom are women. Community engagement and social interaction helps reduce caregiver loneliness and isolation, and that is where the Society steps in.

?On nice days, we have a door from the day program that leads directly into the sensory garden, which is located right on the other side of the wall of the day program,? says Mr. Freid. ?We eliminated about seven parking spots and put the day program in its place. Seven parking spots doesn't sound like a lot of space, but when you're in here and you see it, people are taken aback with just the feeling of size and roominess to it.

?These are the reasons and this particular sensory garden that we built has an exterior wooden fence that provides that safety and security and it helps to create what we say is a quiet oasis from the parking lot. There is a walking path around the perimeter of the garden and this walking path helps to reduce anxiety and stress. We have all different kinds of plants, bushes and shrubbery in the Sensory Garden so clients can smell and even taste a rich variety of non-toxic plants like lavender, petunias, lilies and so forth.?

Vegetables and herbs harvested by the raised garden beds will be shared with clients during lunchtime meals. The central pergola provides filtered shade and seating areas making it a ?calming destination? and a ?fundamental and essential outdoor program? that will become a cornerstone of what the Society offers.

?We think this will enrich the experience of our day program clients who come to us six days a week and all of this is part of our reason for locating,? says Mr. Freid of their decision to move from Newmarket to Aurora, into the former home of Canadian Law Book, now known as the Cartwright Building, which is now shared by the society with CHATS (Community and Home Assistance to Seniors), York Support Services Network, and Hunter Engineering.

?It wasn't just a matter of coming into a bigger space that would provide service to more people, but it was also an opportunity to

provide better and more diversified service and the opening of the sensory garden is one example of how we are able to execute that at the Cartwright Building.

The Society's Sensory Garden was made possible with support from several donors, including the J.P. Bickell Foundation, The Commonwell Mutual Insurance Group, and Dr. Allan Carswell and the Carswell Family Foundation. Garden design and landscaping work was provided by Newmarket's Atlas Landscaping.

“There were a variety of elements that had to come together to make this happen,” says Mr. Freid. “There is the vision and desire of the staff to accommodate the client needs and to enhance services. There is the great support of our landlords, the Cartwright Group, who saw the value of the Sensory Garden and approved its construction in the parking lot, the great cooperation of the tenants to allow us to use part of the parking spaces for the garden, and the great design work of Atlas Landscaping that captured the essence of what we wanted to achieve with the garden.

“There was also the input from our families that provided the ideas for the garden, many of which were incorporated into the design. We would also like to thank our three main benefactors, the J.P. Bickell Foundation, The Commonwell Mutual Insurance Group, and Dr. Allan Carswell and the Carswell family who took it upon themselves to match the gifts from both Commonwell and the Foundation in order to put us over the top.”